

# “What, Then, Is Our Task?”

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Abstract: This dialogic inquiry broaches something burgeoning—something brand new and age-old—as we wonder about our tasks as critical scholars in the field of education. Increasingly, education seems awash in a tide of performing *deep-feltness* as sometimes over-wrought but maybe well-intended White scholars scramble toward Reconciliation. In conversation with each other, we wonder how honest and difficult conversations that surface more truth about our own ancestors could better prepare us to wade through what arises so that we can arrive at a place where reconciliation might be possible.

Résumé : Cette enquête dialogique aborde quelque chose de tout à fait nouveau et séculaire alors que nous nous interrogeons sur notre rôle en tant que chercheurs dans le domaine de l'éducation. De plus en plus, le monde de l'éducation semble inondé de sentiments profonds de la part des chercheurs de race blanche par rapport à la réconciliation. Ces chercheurs semblent bien intentionnés. Ensemble, comment pouvons-nous avoir des conversations honnêtes et difficiles pour faire ressortir davantage de vérité sur nos propres ancêtres afin de mieux nous préparer à arriver à un endroit où la réconciliation pourrait être possible.

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### Some Context

We recently participated in a Zoom conversation with nearly one hundred others, where we talked over contributions to a newly published book, swaying to beautiful myriads of voices and songlines. This put us in mind of a powerful line from Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1989) *Truth and Method* that sits at the heart of learning, of teaching, of listening, and of speaking. He said that a text, a conversation, a painting, a tree, a curriculum topography "would not deserve the interest we take in it if it did not have something to teach us that we could not know by ourselves" (p. xxxv). Subtly hidden there is that, if we properly attend to learning, we do not just gain knowledge about a subject or what others may think or have to say about it; we learn about ourselves as *subjects* in conversation with others. Through relationship, our presumptions, limitations, lacks, hopes, histories, desires, and so on become known to us in a way not possible alone. Seeking out perspectives of others, then, is as vital to our own well-being as it is to social consciousness. This is a lesson we learn again and again, most recently in an email exchange after the Zoom gathering we noted above. Our lesson broaches something burgeoning—something brand new and age-old—a locale of compassion and best intentions, punctuated with stinging truths as we endeavour to move thoughtfully and sincerely toward Reconciliation.

### David Jardine 7:02 AM MDT

One little thing I found fascinating nestled in the detailed talk about honouring ancestors and working toward Reconciliation was when someone who appeared to be White said, "this is an example of what I call..." and then proceeded with a direct quotation of someone else—someone in the lineage of the work being *claimed* but who was not mentioned at all. *Right there, in that moment*, was a chance for that person to have acknowledged an ancestor of their own, *and they didn't*. Instead, they unintentionally colonised that phrase without any acknowledgement. This was most likely completely unintentional, maybe even good-hearted, but it reminded me how subtle colonisation can act—absorbing the world into one's own subjectivity. This person could have remembered the name of the person who informed their thinking, said it out loud, and rescued us all from their enclosure. They could have rescued the academic ancestor that they summoned but then ignored. I know this isn't the same thing as the larger call to Reconciliation, but it shines a light

on our historical and continuing tendency to absorb and claim as our own.

Another thing that crossed my mind during the Zoom session was, during all the earnest and important talk of honouring ancestors, I kept thinking, *you don't want me to honour all my ancestors*. Have you heard of the Jardine-Matheson Company and the opium wars, for example? Honouring all my ancestors is over-generalized and idealistic and mushy. It is too naive and too easy. It is allowing too many Settlers to drift toward First Nations orbits, hiding there from their own ancestors instead of doing a careful, studied parsing of their personal histories. And, even if it is a well-intended attempt at Reconciliation, *deep-feltness* is not enough.

### Ellyn Lyle, 7:26 MDT

It was an interesting event, one that left me feeling quite conflicted because the moments of social consciousness were sullied by other moments of the mere performance of it. I was stewing in the aftermath, not sure how to process it, so I appreciate your thoughtfulness and care coupled so beautifully with honesty and insight. I'm finding it increasingly difficult to talk about these things because the performance of social consciousness has been confused with the work of social conscience. For me, it's as complex as it is simple: we are all privileged by virtue of having access to these conversations at the pinnacle of intellectual privilege: academe. Lately, though, there seems so much focus on articulating our injuries or praising our heroism in treating the injuries of others that we have lost sight of the actual call to action—to do better. To be better. I don't know if I'm more tired of performative wokeness or abject (even willful) unconsciousness. It seems to me that historically privileged groups have learned that, by paying lip service, they can ride the coattails of historically minoritised people by claiming to be allies. Is this not the worst kind of colonisation? Is this not a continued misappropriation of another's culture?

I spoke with a Dene friend about this, specifically as it relates to land acknowledgements. She said of a recent guest lecture she had given, the highest ranking (White) academic in the room stood to give a land acknowledgement before my friend began her talk. When the land acknowledgement was over, my friend walked to where the other person sat, took their water, and then went to the podium. The land acknowledger raised her hand and asked if she could have her water back, and my friend said "No, but I acknowledge I took it."

Enough said.

### David Jardine, 8:09 MDT

“Willful unconsciousness.” Hah, yeah, or maybe just abject unconsciousness in some cases as you suggest. I recall over the decades how some folks, who sincerely wanted to step away from their inheritance and find the lightness that comes from such wanting, became emotional to the point of tears—poetic to the point of triviality. I’ll include myself here as well, wanting to fly free of it and using language that is, ironically, *full of it*. My own attraction to Alan Watts as far back as 1968 when I was drawn to “interrelatedness,” “oneness,” “Earth,” as if saying these words sincerely and repeatedly enough would, by itself, do all the terrifyingly difficult work that was needed. Too often, the writing that followed (my own included here), if it was not tempered and strengthened by the sort of ancestral study that is adequate to it, simply swirled up quickly into what Martin Amis called *dead freight* writing (Amis & Rose, 2007). He argued that we need to wage war against clichés because they are herd words and perpetuate herd thinking and herd feeling.

*We’re all interconnected* and that sort of thing—dead freight. Because of the depth of what is trying to erupt—trying to interrupt—even well-meant clichés leave a lot of room to feel offense. Because, yes, we are interconnected but to say it and move on without untangling it is too much akin to mumbled acknowledgements—a skittering across the waters of emotionality; it betrays something that should be fundamental in our efforts. To quote your email:

It seems to me that historically privileged groups have learned that, by paying lip service, they can ride the coattails of historically minoritised people by claiming to be allies. Is this not the worst kind of colonisation? Is it not a continued misappropriation of another’s culture?

So, yes, we need to turn our backs on this sort of bilge and embrace with as much affection as we can muster those mired in it—the unpracticed but well-meaning—because what is trying to be born is fragile. At every step, I need such allowance for myself as well. Like I’ve joked over the past couple of years with drop-in guest lectures on Zoom, *don’t think for a moment that I’m doing this just for you*.

*I need this, too, going to this place where the blood of all our hearts is squeezed in a Raven's beak.*

What, then, *is* our task? Healing is needed, grieving and joy are needed, but we need more truth before reconciliation can begin. Breaking the spell is tough, important labour that requires a detailed and clear-eyed excavation of our own ancestry, or we risk repeating the old patterns of co-optation. Maybe all we can do is try to remain alert to this bristling circumstance and how easy it is to slip into unconsciousness all over again.

I recalled decades ago getting drunk with Ted Aoki and him telling me how, if he is standing at the front of a class, all he has to do is bow his head and put his hands to his forehead, and the whole class will think he's very wise. We murmured over me quoting Buddhists and him humming Heideggerianisms, and we laughed and laughed and laughed. But I never did directly ask him, "What shall we do, then?"

And as you know, I went on to quote Buddhism ridiculously often. But my own scholarly urge—the one that led me as an undergrad to read Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and Edmund Husserl's *Ideas Towards a Pure Phenomenology* cover to cover multiple times—led me to Tsongkhapa's three volumes, written in 1406, that I've now read and underlined 10 times or more. I memorized passages that I wanted to carry around with me, and then read about a dozen commentaries stretching over the intervening years trying to get my own attraction to Buddhist thinking to get over itself. Scholarly meditateness is how it came to appear as I made connections between Tsongkhapa's work and that of Gadamer, or Wendell Berry, or Gary Snyder...not the same, not different—kin. Affinities...bloodlines—ancestors, if you will.

It is important for me to think of how we might near up toward First Nations' voices and how I might get to doing the work *I've been practicing for a long time* and not either appropriate or simply turn to bad-poetry mush. I've done enough of both, I expect. How shall we approach other radiant beings who are nearing insight but welling up too quickly? This thought floats by every time I write because there will be and should be time for more tears but, *right now*, there is work to be done.

David Jardine, 8:19 MDT

From your earlier email, this is utterly key, I think:

I'm finding it increasingly difficult to talk about these things because the performance of social consciousness has been confused with the work of social conscience.

That we are both finding it increasing difficult is, strangely, the gift we've been given.

### David Jardine, 8:32: MDT

I think it is my/our job to recognize our own illness and cures. Our own breakthroughs, like this White guy citing another White guy:

I try to follow Meister Eckhart's advice  
*Do exactly what you would do if you felt*  
*most secure* sometimes it takes  
 sometimes it doesn't meanwhile saints  
 graze on the begonias  
 ravens go to the edges of the earth  
 and return with our hearts in their beaks

the ones we thought were in our bodies  
 the ones we thought were redeemed  
 (Domanski, 2010, p. 121)

When someone murmurs “we’re all interrelated,” it hints at the explosive moment of recognition that can happen when the right word appears to the right eye/ear at just the right time. That is why I memorized it, I think, because its companionship is ancestral and comforting and a relief:

Every word breaks forth as if from a center [and] causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear. Thus, every word carries with it the unsaid to which it is related by responding and summoning. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 458).

This passage hopefully makes understandable why I bothered citing Don Domanski (2010) and why, when citing him, other words came to mind. Relations get summoned up in all directions at once with writing like this—with ancestors like this. Domanski’s words make Gadamer’s words sing like an ancestral chant and vice versa. This makes Gadamer’s (1989) words *better*: “At the centre of a stone or at the axis of a tree...there’s the silence of a world turning”

(Domanski, 2002, p. 245). They make clear why I carry such words in *my* beak. And meanwhile, Odin's two Ravens were named for Thought (Hugin) and Memory (Muninn):

Huginn and Muninn hover each day  
The wide earth over;  
I fear for Huginn lest he fare not back,—  
Yet watch I more for Muninn.  
(Sturluson, 1222-23)

David Jardine, 8:42: MDT



Raven carrying my heart in its beak  
responding  
summoning  
memory  
thought

### Ellyn Lyle, 8:51 MDT

This is an important conversation because it, once again, surfaces both *social consciousness* and *social conscience*. In responding to a call to be better humans, how do we contribute in a meaningful way acknowledging our missteps, misappropriations, misalignments, and mistreatments while living sincerely, honestly, and transparently with compassion, decency, and commitment? Circling back to an earlier statement, I don't think people have the right to claim allyship. I think doing so is another form of colonisation. I think our responsibility is to do the necessary work of Reconciliation and, if people see us as allies, then we know we're doing our work well. I find it difficult to navigate how to build these relationships, though, because my way of engaging is through auto/biographical story. Right now, I don't feel like I can share my story without falling into the rabbit hole of *claiming identity*—an occurrence that is happening with alarming frequency and, sometimes, with questionable motives. Consequently, I leave my own roots buried, safe from the careless trodding of those who have not yet learned “to walk in a good way” (Tait, 2016, p. 21). Complicated stuff.

### David Jardine, 9:04 MDT

Yes, and this works in both directions at once, this ally...how we graciously acknowledge what seems to be our alignments, our affinities, our attempts at self- and mutual- elaboration.... I once had a journal editor insist that before a block citation, I *must* add something like “As Gadamer said...”, otherwise, I am “appropriating” his words *as if* I'm trying to pretend that I said them, even with a citation at the end of a block quote. I always advised students that this sort of thing pushes Gadamer away and lets them off the hook for having the audacity to make me read it. I've come to think of *reference lists* this way and, when I do, I no longer have the old urge to stuff them full. Again, complicated stuff. To learn these words by heart is...well, I don't learn all words by heart, only the ones that I don't want to forget...the ones that nourish me.

Interesting that Buddhism calls “identity” *the* root affliction, *the* root source of human suffering, so I always wince a bit at talk of “Do you identify as...?” Just like my old joke that the problem with Eurocentrism might not be the *Euro* but the *centrism*. It is the centrism that is at the root of colonialism—the contraction into an

excluding, self-aggrandizing *us*. And me from a family traceable back to Quebec and the Maritimes in the 1600s, where my great-grandfather, for fear of being thought French, Anglicized their last name, *Terriault* to *Terrio* (just the boys' names, since the girls would either marry and lose the name, or not marry but not pass it on. Acadians). And then, when my mother's family, the Terrios, moved to Toronto from Nova Scotia, they changed it to Terrie because "People thought we were Italians!" My brother's name is Terry.

### Postscript

I think we've glanced upon the beginnings of something that has been silent too long. While it's articulated here with good intentions, we know that only goes a certain distance. So, the question lingers: *what, then, is our task?*

Sing a bit.

Listen.

Warm the chill with thought and memory like Odin's two Ravens sent off into the world.

To borrow from your earlier words, we must

contribute in a meaningful way acknowledging our missteps, misappropriations, misalignments, and mistreatments while living sincerely, honestly, and transparently with compassion, decency, and commitment.

Perhaps this is our task—to adore these moments of aligning, to embrace the search for our own ancestral voices: those we've learned by heart; those we struggle to remember on purpose; and those we keep tucked safely away from the carelessness of others. It is the nourishment we can bring as the warming chills so that we remind ourselves to do the work we began before it was politically popular and hold ourselves accountable to continue it if ever it loses favour.



A nice and frosty Atom Bomb cluster  
Insinuating old nightmares.

There is something to be said for  
Hallucinations like these. They  
Can be the temporary holders of nebulous woes looking for a home.  
Places to light. To rest these wearies.  
To maybe manifest woes looking for a body hale enough to hold  
them,  
embrace them  
and maybe even a chance to lance their poisons now beheld.  
Wounds sometimes need a bigger wound to heal.  
This is why poetry. Why art or a photograph. Or lines, written.

A place, perhaps, some day, some day,  
to lay those woes down in the  
Happenstance beauty of melting winter ice.

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